BEAUFORT, BOWMAN. Three Stories. (1969) Directed by: Fred Chappell. pp. 58.

This thesis consists of three stories which, in their own way, do a single thing. It has best been described by Tennessee Williams (in The Night of the Iguana) as "open gates of communication between people." Thus, one may note that each of the stories begins at a point where the characters are in a state of "incommunicativeness." Yet, as they close, it can be seen that a kind of rapport has developed between them. Of course the degree and permanence of this is another thing. But that, it would seem, is more correctly suited to the structure of the novel than the framework of a short story.

THREE STORIES

by

Bowman Beaufort

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE GAME

To Diane

Down the road, through the dry and nameless dust of early September, the men sitting outside the store could see that something was coming. And fast. At first, they did not even move or speak: simply remaining mute and transfixed in their self-imposed immobility as the object kept approaching. Then Reece, the proprietor, came out. He was a big, squarely built man, who always had a cigar in his mouth, though most of the time he did not bother to light it. But the men did not seem to notice him either until he walked over to the edge of the porch and spat accurately at a fly that was buzzing around his dog's genitals.

"Goddamn," he said raising his head and looking down the road: "That's Edna; gotta be. Ain't nobody else drives like that round here."

At this one of the men guffawed in agreement and looked up at Reece and smiled. Reece acknowledged this briefly but still continued looking down the road at the automobile.

"Yessir," Reece continued, taking his cigar out of his mouth momentarily, "I'd know that car anywhere. That bitch has been coming here for the past six months. Once a week. Regular. Always buys the same things too: couple of rolls

of cloth she makes them dresses out of, and the can of sardines and RC. Then goes out in her car and eats them just like a field hand. Never says a word either. Just comes in, gets them, and leaves."

With Reece, there were four men on the porch. The first two (really just fair-headed boys out of high school) drove a delivery truck for the ice company. It was not much of a job--they both knew this, but it did leave them with their week-ends free, so each figured that it would do until the army got them in October. The third, the Negro Rufus, worked all the time. Or rather, Rufus just worked whenever a car pulled up to Reece's store to buy gas. The rest of the time he sat out on the porch. But when a car would come in to buy gas, Rufus would get up and smile at the owner and pump the gas into his tank while he went inside to pay Reece. He never even bothered to clean the windshield because it was always so dusty that it never had the chance to stay clean.

By this time Edna had driven her car up to the porch. She never drove up and parked parallel to the store the way other people did, but always drove directly at it, almost, or so it would seem, as if she were not even aware of its presence or planned to hit it, driving right between the two gas pumps and stopping about three feet short of the door. Then she would get out of the car (it was a green and white '56 Ford with all the windows broken or cracked except the rear one) and slam the door shut in one inseparable motion. She was a large fat woman, who wore her hair knotted behind

her head in a strange**mis**shapened bun that was seemingly held together with green and orange pins. If there were a hat, it would always be black. Only today she did not have one on, and you would never consider asking her why. People just seemed to accept Edna and it was generally thought that this was the way she wanted it. Besides, she always seemed to be in a hurry—with some quite urgent and important thing to do.

Yet she still had on her bright floral dress, the kind she invariably wore, with large flowers in vivid patterns that seemed to accent her fatness even more. But like most fat people, Edna did not know how to dress or if she did, she did not concern herself with it. In fact, Edna seemed quite unconscious of her weight. She did what she had to do with a kind of boisterous dignity, always moving about in a firm, yet sure, manner, quite in control of the situation. So this was how she went into the store: entering it by ascending the brief elevation that led up to the porch, then on it, across it, and through the door with a seemingly effortless agility that was uniquely her own. All Reece could do was follow her. Once inside, he walked behind the counter and waited: not meekly, quietly, but uneasily. And Edna: moving about the store, chewing a piece of gum now, going to the rear where Reece kept the cloth, selecting the colors she needed: painted cottons for the remaining hot days and a few woolens for the winter; then the sardines: reaching

up and grabbing the top can and then getting a package of saltines to put them between; and now coming to Reece, who already had the RC opened and on the counter waiting for her, and doing his best at trying a feeble smile. Edna seemed to notice this and then said (not bluntly or abruptly, but assuredly): "How much?" And Reece: somewhat taken back by this (for she had talked to him now) yet still not saying though he was thinking let's see now. The sardines and saltines are a quarter, and the RC's a dime; the cloth's two dollars a roll, and you have five rolls, so that'll be ten dollars--$10.53 all together, and $10.65 with the tax but simply saying (after he had added it up in his head) "$10.66 ma'am."

Edna heard this and seemed to agree with it, though she did not make any reply. But she did reach down into her bag and retrieve the small purse that she kept her money in, so Reece presumed that everything was all right. And Reece was watching her, fascinated with her movements: the small hands finding the purse, then one of them grasping the roll of money while the other pulled off the rubber band around it and peeled off ten ones. Then Edna emptied the rest of the contents (a haphazard mixture of odd change, rubber bands, and chewing gum wrappers) onto the counter and managed to find sixty-six cents. She gave this to Reece, then reached down into her bag and handed him a piece of paper, gathered up her goods, and walked out.

When she was out the door, Reece looked at the piece of paper that Edna had given him. It was a bible tract and was about a man who was jumping off a diving board and looked down into the water and saw his outstretched arms forming a crosslike reflection below. On the way down the man thought about Calvary and Jesus hanging on the cross and how much Jesus loved him and determined that he too must become a Christian.

Reece put the tract in his pocket and walked outside the door. Edna was still there, sitting in the car eating her sardines and saltines and swigging the RC, but Reece pretended that he was not looking at her. Still, he thought she knew he was, so he walked over and sat beside one of the high school boys: "What you boys doing here on Saturday? I thought you always drove up to Columbia—to the races."

"That's true," one of the boys said, "but they ain't having them this week. Ran out of prize money."

"Oh."

"But they should be having one next week," the other one said, "'cause Leroy told me that he was going by the bank, if he had to."

Reece nodded his head slowly to this and began kicking one of the poles that held up the porch. Occasionally he would look over to see if Edna was looking at him. She

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wasn't. At least not when he was looking to see if she was. Then he heard her crank up her car, and looked up and saw her back out into the road and drive away.

When she had almost disappeared, one of the high school boys said: "Good Jesus, that's the ugliest woman I ever seen. And fat too. God. Think she's ever been tapped, Reece?"

Before Reece could answer, the other high school boy said, "Hell no! Who'd want that pig?"

Rufus started laughing at this, but Reece looked at him sharply and the Negro abruptly stopped and began knocking his knees together.

"Think you could get that, Reece," the first high school boy said laughing.

"Sure," Reece said, "anybody could." And this said not with conviction or even determination but simply and matter-of-factly much the same way people pass each other on the street and nod, or smile, or even stop occasionally for the mere civilities of conversation and then go on about their business as if the meeting, the brief interlude on the sidewalks, had not taken place at all, since after Reece said it he left: got up and walked across the porch and into his store still puffing on his cigar which was not even lit.

"He's scared of her," the first high school boy said once Reece was inside.

"Him," the second said.

"Sure he is," resumed the first. "Reece is scared that he can't get her."

"Whatya mean?" inquired the first.

"It's just that a woman that ugly," the first said, beginning again, "has gotta have something. Nobody wants her; she's too ugly even for that. But even if someone did, she would never give in. She'd resist anybody—and Reece knows this."

"But you know how Reece is," the second boy said. "He's had more women than he can remember."

"He ain't had Edna."

"But I bet he could."

"No man could, not even Reece."

"Wanna bet?" the second said. This, because he was sure. Ever since he was a freshman he had seen Reece operate: watching him get in his car and go down to Charleston. And this was not just on weekends, the Friday and Saturday nights when everybody went out, but on days like Tuesday when everyone else would be home watching television. And Reece was not even a young man. He was somewhere close to fifty. But when you looked at Reece you knew that he knew.

"Sure," the first one said. And he was sure too: Not because he did not know Reece (he did) but because he knew Edna. She was a member of his church and she was there every Sunday. She would come in the door with her Bible

clasped over her bosom and walk down the aisle and take her seat in the front pew without even giving the usher the chance to escort her. When the service was over she would get up and walk out much the same way she came in: the Bible still firmly planted on her bosom; the short fast walk. She would rarely stop, and if she did it would only be to speak to the mothers of the daughters she made dresses for. They would tell her how much they adored the dresses and Edna would respond with some minor pleasantry and go her way. This would usually be all. She was not a conversationalist and did not try to be. In fact, she seemed to get along with as few words as possible, but still, when she did talk, people seemed anxious to hear what she had to say. Yet she hardly seemed to talk with men at all—even the preacher. Whenever there were men around, Edna bristled up and walked away.

So in the stilling September afternoon the two boys sat on the porch and agreed that they would make a wager. This was not done for the sake of any purported pecuniary gains (they had little money anyway, so this would not even be considered) but simply for the chance of waiting around to see what would happen when two forces, two direct opposites of each other, were brought close enough together so that either one or the other would fall. All that remained now was the problem of convincing the participants that there

actually was to be a contest. They both knew that this would not be easy. But they decided that the easiest way would be for them to convince Reece. They would not even approach Edna, but they determined that if they could convince Reece, they would leave the problem of Edna up to him.

This decided, the two got up off the porch and walked inside the store to see Reece. He was standing behind the counter, his cigar still unlit, when they came in. He did not acknowledge them, but they knew that he had seen them come in. At first they just stood inside the store as if they came in to buy something but, once inside, had forgotten what it was and were now standing looking down the aisles trying to remember. Finally Reece said: "Is there something I can do for you boys?"

The first one said, walking slowly up to the counter," . . . uh . . . Reece, I was . . . wondering . . ."--"Yes."--"Well you know Edna. . ."--"What about her?"--"Well, do you think you . . . could?"

Reece did not say anything to this. He remained behind his counter, looking straight ahead and beyond the rows of lined food, as if there were no one else in the store except himself. The boy waited a while, mutely holding his distance, and then he started to ask Reece again. But Reece stopped him this time. He turned and looked at the boy and said: "Whatya mean <u>could</u>?"

"Well you know . . ." the boys said, his voice falling off and disappearing like smoke drifting into the air.

"Sure," Reece said, trying to sound triumphant. "I told you that before. But what business of yours is it anyway? Besides, the bitch is too ugly in the first place."

Then the first, gaining his confidence, said boldly, flatly: "I don't think you could; no man could, not even you."

"Listen," Reece said, asserting himself. "I ain't never been out with no woman I didn't get."

"Maybe," the first boy said, stepping back, "but you ain't had her."

"I'll tell you something," Reece said, his voice controlled now but still defiant, "I could tap that if I wanted too—but I don't; she's too goddam ugly."

"I bet you couldn't" the first boy replied, still standing back, but looking directly at Reece. And he had said it now, asserted it again. He had offered the gambit, now all he had to do would be to wait and see whether Reece took it or not.

A slow smile spread across Reece's face as he continued to look squarely into the boy's eyes. Then, rising slowly back on his feet and crossing his arms about his chest, he said: "Tell me something boy; just how much do you know about this in the first place? How many girls you had? One or none?"

The high school boy reddened and looked down.

"Just as I thought," Reece said, laughing almost to himself. "You come in here not knowing one damn thing about what you talking and ask me to tap a girl that nobody'd want. You must think I'm crazy or something. Why don't you get her yourself? Or don't you think you could? You gotta start someplace, you know."

At this, the boys started to leave. They were already out the door when Reece said: "Wait. Come back here a minute." The boys turned around and came back inside the store. "Tell you what I'm gonna do," Reece said, lighting his cigar, "I'm gonna get that bitch just for the hell of it; even if I have to tie a bag over her head and close my eyes to do it. Not because I want her, mind you, but just to show you boys I can have her. Ain't no woman turned me down before, and I can see no reason for them to start now."

Winter came to the low country in late November, brought one brief snowfall in January, and was gone by early March. The two high school boys had been inducted into the army back in October and were now somewhere in Germany. Reece had not seduced Edna for them before they left. And it was not because he hadn't tried. He had. Hard. But the fact of the matter was that he had not even taken her out. He wanted to; that was not his problem. It was Edna. She never gave him the chance to ask her. She would always be in and out of his store, hardly giving him time to say

anything. But occasionally when she came to his store they would talk: though this was only in a kind of minor dialogue and usually pertained to whatever it was Edna was buying at the time. If they talked of anything else it would almost always be about the weather—Reece would ask Edna if it was cold enough outside for her and she would usually say that it was.

Yet, as far as Reece was concerned, the contest was still on. He had by no means given up. The boys were gone now so that did not matter (even though he had received a card from one of them at Christmas with a big question mark on it). But he had reached the point now when he had to prove this for himself. Because for the first time in his life he was faced with failure, and he didn't like it. It frightened him; it worried him; he couldn't get Edna off his mind.

Spring came right on the heels of winter. It did not warm up gradually but was more like a transformation: one night you would go to bed and sleep under a blanket and wake up the next morning with only a sheet. Outside people would be busy: the Negroes plowing their fields with weather-beaten mules, melodiously calling out "gee" and "haw" to their animals, while the white farmers had their tractors and newly-purchased machines going well before sunup. The school children would be up and dressed waiting for the bus long before it was due, shouting and chasing each other

about—their minds on anything but last night's arithmetic. Even Reece opened his store at four a.m. to give the farmers the chance to buy their seed and fertilizer so they could get to the fields around five.

And Edna was busy too: she came into Reece's store almost two times a week now to look over his racks of cloth and select the ones she thought would make good dresses. She even seemed more talkative, though Reece wouldn't swear to this. But he decided to try something new anyway. He put some of the best patterns from the shipment of cloth he had just received in the back room. The next time that Edna came in, Reece thought to himself, he would tell her about the cloth and offer to take her back and show it to her.

The following Tuesday she came in. She still kept pretty much to herself, as before, although this time when she entered she did nod to Reece. There was no one else in the store, but Reece looked around once more to make sure. He quickly reassured himself that—except for Edna and himself—his store was empty. Still, he planned to let Edna select the cloth she wanted from the rack on display first and bring it up to him before he would tell her about the other cloth.

Edna went back to the clothrack and Reece found that he was watching her rather intensely. She seemed so content humming to herself among the rolls of cloth, taking one, then

another down, and fingering the material gently with her hands as she held it up to the light to see it better.

When she had finished selecting her cloth, Edna came up to the counter and placed it beside Reece, a slight smile on her face.

"Will that be all?" Reece asked her.

"Yes, thank you," Edna replied.

"You seem to buy a mighty lot of cloth when you come here," Reece said.

"I make dresses," Edna said, beginning to grow a little nervous and starting to fumble in her bag for her purse, "--for the girls around here, you know."

"I thought you must do something like that," Reece said smiling, "so I put some cloth up for you out of the new shipment we just got in. Been keeping it in the back room so nobody'd get it. Like me to show it to you?"

Edna stood mutely in front of the counter. She took her hand out of her bag and brought it up to her chin, rubbing reflectively. Reece was not sure what she was thinking but he figured that she was thinking she would not go. Then Edna said: "I'd be grateful." Point-blankly. And no more. Yet this was more than Reece had expected. But he still remained behind his side of the counter, his face almost as bewildered as hers. Finally he realized that the next move was up to him, so clearing his throat with an almost inaudible sound, Reece walked around the counter to

where Edna was standing and said, pointing to the back of the store with his finger: "They're right back there; like to see them now?"

Without waiting for Edna's reply, Reece began walking to the rear of the store. He had a long stride but he tried to curtail it so he wouldn't leave Edna too far behind. Even so, he knew that Edna was following a good distance behind him since he could hear her footsteps on the wooden floor. They produced a vain, sharp tapping sound, and he knew from hearing it that Edna was trying not to walk as heavily as she generally did.

When they came to the rear room, Reece opened the door and Edna went in first. It was dark inside but Reece quickly put on the light. He knew that Edna was probably apprehensive, and he didn't want anything to upset her. Reece had come to realize that in her own way Edna was pretty much a delicate creature, and he had determined long ago that if he was to have any success with her, he would have to be gentle about it. Yet, once the light was on and Edna was able to see the cloth, she seemed to relax almost instantaneously, and Reece stood back and watched her victoriously. The bright new cloth in the colorful spring patterns allayed Edna's fears somewhat; she was back in her world again, humming softly to herself, unrolling the cloth, and running her fingers across it.

When she had finished looking through the cloth, Edna selected the ones she wanted and turned around and smiled at

Reece. Then she said: "These are lovely. Thank you so much for saving them for me." At this, Reece walked slowly over to Edna, returned her smile and said, "It was my pleasure. I thought you'd like them." And now that he was near her, looking into her eyes with his own, Reece placed his hand gently against Edna's and said, his voice almost in a whisper, "Any more shipments come in, I'll keep the best ones for you back here." And that was all. Nothing more. Not even a move or gesture from Reece because after he had said it he turned around on his heels, swung his hand gallantly toward the door, and followed Edna out of the room.

When they were outside the room and in the main part of the store again, Reece closed the door and walked with Edna up to the counter. This time the two of them walked together, side by side among the rows of packaged food. They did not say anything or even attempt to speak but each was aware of the other's closeness. They separated only when it was time for Reece to go behind the counter and take Edna's money. And the transaction went well and smoothly. When it was completed, Edna thanked Reece, walked out the door and got into her car. And Reece came out the door and stood silently on his porch, watching Edna drive home behind the rays of falling sunlight that were almost the color of gold.

THE PROJECTIONIST

In its heyday, the Dreamland theater in Waycross, Georgia, literally sparkled, for the lights which hung from the French chandeliers in its nave were shaped like candles and whenever one of them burned out, Ham, the janitor was sure to come and replace it immediately. That was when Horace Mitchell first came to work. Previously he had been in France with the war but had come back by way of New York and took to shooting pool and quick snooker in East Harlem with a fifty-six year old Negro warehouse guard from Tennessee who called himself Spots Walker. But, if truth be relevant, it should be insisted upon at the forehand that Mitchell got his job as the Dreamland's chief projectionist more through his mother's efforts than his own individual endeavors. For it was Mitchell's mother who saw the "projectionist wanted" sign in the box office window and went directly in to see the manager (whom she had once declined to be her beau and bore no real liking to see again) on the simple reason that, the war being over, she was plain tired of having a son way up there in the North like something crazy and not home with his roots like he should be.

So she dressed as appropriately as she thought fitting, wearing a blue, almost silken kind of dress, with white shoes and matching beaded bag and, even though late August and still

quite hot, she chose to wear gloves rather than carry them in her hand. Her appearance, to say the least, was striking, and when she told the secretary she wished to see the manager on a personal matter, she was shown into his office ahead of all who were in the room and already waiting.

"Elnora!" the manager exclaimed rising from his seat as he turned from the window and saw her come in: "I never thought to see you here."

"I'm not here for myself," Mitchell's mother explained quickly: "It's Horace."

She took the chair beside his desk, putting her pocketbook in her lap, then folding her hands across it.

The manager, his eyes still on her, sat back in his chair dejected: hers were as blue as ever and went with a blue dress exactly as he had remembered their doing.

Still he knew he must go on but "Is he in some kind of trouble?" was the best he could force out.

"No, it's not anything like that," Mrs. Mitchell began, only to stop to gather herself before going on. "It's just that I feel Horace should be home now. I have lost his father and had to give him up for the war, and now that it's over I want him home with me, only he has come to feel that there is nothing down here for him to do."

Then: "But as I was walking by the theater this morning . . . ." Her voice trailed off and it was obvious that she would go no further.

Once more he knew he was studying her. It was true that she had aged. Yet she was undoubtedly still beautiful and seeing her hair (warm and full and very deep behind her neck) only served to remind him of how he was delighted when once she allowed him to touch it. But, forcing the thought from his mind, the manager turned from her and looked back out the window.

"Do you know what's going on over there?" he finally said.

"You mean across the street?"

"Yes."

"The new theater?"

"That's right; the Empyrean. Do you know what that means?"

"I'm afraid I know very little about the business world." She said it slow and deliberately, as though it were completely true.

"Well, for that matter, neither do I," the manager confessed, "but I can tell you that--frankly--that place scares me. They are going to be our competition and we have never had competition in Waycross before."

"Surely you don't think people who have gone here all their lives are just going to up and desert you?" She put it more as a reply than a question.

"I certainly hope not," the manager said turning from the window and back to her: "but people are strange; they

have a way of liking new and different things."

"That may be," Mrs. Mitchell conceded, "but I fail to see how all this relates to Horace."

"That's <u>just</u> the point," the manager prefaced himself: "Ordinarily, I would be most sympathetic with your plight. You know that. And, normally, I'm sure that there would be something we could work out. But the plain fact of it is we are just going to have to have somebody up there that knows what he is doing. If I put somebody up there green and he starts making mistakes and ruining the picture, then not even the folks who do show up are going to come back; surely you can understand that."

Mitchell's mother sat back in her chair (soft and calm, as if she were on some afternoon veranda, knitting: waiting only for the unpenciled shades of evening) and watched him. Then she said: "Just tell me one thing, Glynn, how many such people do you think you are going to find like that around Waycross?"

Her remark did not cause him to whiten or go apace because the manager had already thought about Atlanta and Jacksonville and knew he would go there if it came to it: still he knew that he would say "I don't suppose your son has ever done this kind of work before, has he?"

"He can learn." Her eyes were mist, or tears, but right at him.

Once more the manager turned from her and again sought the window, and, when there, beyond it, to where he could see the derrick's lone steel obelisk that was already in the process of raising the Empyrean's marquee for a final alinement.

"Can you give me one good reason why I should even consider this," the manager heard himself saying.

"Because you once loved me."

At first she thought that he was not going to answer. Because the manager simply remained where he was, nonmoving and soundless, his quiescence caused as much by her reply and presence as anything beyond the window. Yet even though Mitchell's mother was aware of this, she also realized that it was not for her to decide which of these was the strongest or caused him the most pain; she only knew what was obvious: that he was airless and walled from her, almost as though he thought the air between them weightless and incapable of carrying sound. . . .

When his words came they were not slow or fast but had a regular, almost freakish cadence about them because they were coming from something he was not but which the manager full well realized he must become, so their verbosity had to be fierce, controlled: "They're out to break us, you know that. The first thing they did was hire our only operator. So that shows you what we're up against . . . . And they are due to open in three weeks."

She knew from the way he was talking that his eyes were set and not moving, much the way she knew, too, that he was suffering from an inner, personal affront as well as the more external harbinger of terror which he could feel encompassing him from beyond, yet: "I wired Horace to come tonight," she said.

"I know," the manager returned: "Tell him he has a week to learn the job."

She had never been one for train stations. They had taken far more from her than they had ever brought back. Yet Mitchell's mother was at the depot long before his train was due. To her, it made more sense than waiting at home. Still, she had imagined that she would find the experience depressing. There, however, she found herself feeling curiously uplifted. The tracks, trainless, but still knifing across all she had ever known, did not seem as distant now or forebearing, and there were actually times in which she could picture herself on them and going wherever they went.

Yet as time for the train's arrival grew closer she became increasingly uneasy. Afterall, it <u>had</u> been so long. And she <u>was</u> worried. She had been ever since the weekly letters from France containing Horace's tithes and regular contributions to the church's building fund (yes: faithful even over there--how grand her circle thought that!) suddenly, and without word or explanation, stopped. This

distressed Mitchell's mother immensely because even though the letters arrived shipload at the time and tied in a bundle, she could see from the dates of their dispatches that they had been mailed separately and from this felt the habit well on the way to taking. Of course when they stopped she kept them up, but, a seamstress around Waycross being what it was, she could not do so without sacrifice. In her own way she never complained, but as she saw the train--a big, black thing in the night--making its way for the station, she knew that she was afraid.

Suddenly her mind was back to when she bore him, the closest she had ever been to death: the numbness real, yet below her, but through which she could feel the surgeon's cutting until the child was torn from her and placed--severed and unknown--on her breast. Because as Mrs. Mitchell saw Horace pass by in the train, his eyes at the window but by no means adumbrative or acknowledging her, her womb once more could feel his tearing since (in the moment of his passing) she again felt him as he had first been: alone and without cord.

But even when he got off the train he did not see her. Of course Mitchell was not expecting to see his mother or anyone else he knew at the depot so he just left his car with no particular manner or expression and walked, perfunctionary, through the rising phantom of steam from the coaches'

air brakes as if he were immune both to it and anything he should happen to encounter on the ground.

His clothes, too, connoted his detachment because even though Mitchell was himself well over six feet tall and had generally strong features, his suit was so dark and generally nondescript that it tended to amalgamate him into the listless banality of his surroundings much the way that his eyes, gaunt and practically nonlooking, served only to direct him mechanically, as though he were no more than a car going somewhere in a line of traffic.

Then a redcap grabbed him by the arm and pointed him toward his mother.

When he saw her his expression did not change. He merely looked at his mother quicksure and irresolute--as though all this while he had been prepared for expected grief, so that, when finding it, he could remain as fixed within himself as possible; only now, seeing her at the rail before him, Mitchell knew that he had been disparaged by her own intuition and unfailing womanhood since the very fact of her quickness and irrefutable presence made all that he had gone about to establish negligible and totally misspent: "I thought you were supposed to be sick," he retorted. "That's what your wire said."

Her eyes fell to the white flower in his lapel so she knew her answer had to be sure and brave: "I am, son," she told him, obviously trying to voice the distance which

she kenned real and still between them, "your mother's sick in her soul."

"You mean you drug me all the way down here just to tell me a fool thing like that?"

The words hurt her deeply, cut farther into the sharp of her flesh than she had previously thought herself capable of bearing. But still she thought: it's either the war or a woman, not him; but, low be, if he will ever come to tell me which.

Yet, despite all his harshness (which, afterall, she had readied herself for), Mitchell looked far worse than she had expected to find him. Whether he was taller or more drawn in from the war she could not be sure, but she could see that his eyes were worn and tired and nearly lightless, and it was this which caused her her most concern.

At this point one of the line's brakemen excused himself and walked through the space that separated Mitchell and his mother, cutting off, as he did, any further conversation between the two. This, more than anything else, stalled the moment's binding stillness, and it was by no means inadvertent that both fell to watching the brakeman with unrelegated relief as he crawled, undisturbed, beneath the observation car's belly. There--just below the coupler--he hit the brake's release valve with his bullwrench. Suddenly, and as if by madness, the entire train was covered with white,

foglike clouds of steam jetting out from the car's girders and forming a blanketlike tunnel of mist through which the train had now begun to move.

Stunned or afraid, Mitchell continued to watch the train's departure until the last coach had disappeared. When it had, he turned from the track and back to his mother and saw for the first time that she was crying.

He was not wearing the day's previous black either. This he had bought, fresh, for his mother's mourning, but today he left it in the closet and brought out, instead, his father's Red Camel overalls he once used for farming and found, still-good, a pair of his own long-forgotten brogans. But he was not yet ready for breakfast even though he could hear his mother's sounds from the kitchen and knew he would soon be smelling the chicory-flavored coffee from Louisiana that only his grandfather allowed him to drink before he was sixteen. So when Mitchell's mother came in to ask about the eggs, Mitchell told her that just the coffee would be fine. But, seated at the table, he kept his eyes mainly at his cup because he knew hers were at his and he did not want her off and expecting things all at first.

Still, his mother said: "Eggs aren't any trouble."

"I know," her son replied, forced to look up, "but I'm not really much of a breakfast-eater anymore."

It was true. He had given up that and mornings when he began to shoot pool with Spots and had reached the point where he felt he could genuinely say he missed neither. But he had told his mother (largely since she did not just out and ask) as they were walking home from the station that he would get up in the morning and at least go try. Once his mother knew this, she was able to walk the rest of the way to the house in an easier silence because she now knew it would eventually ebb, although through the remaining distance it continued to be a real presence, dark and inescapable and almost as thick as the sky.

When Mitchell left his mother at the table and went outside to begin the walk to the Dreamland, he was saddened and shocked to find the darkness of the previous night still about. In fact, had not the moon's lone sickle turned (telling him the night had gone but not yet dissipated, and to look opposite for the sun) he would have thought the nightmare real. As it was, he accepted the blackness and pervading silence much the same way he had accepted his father's overalls when he opened the closet door and found them there beside his shoes. Because he thought: this is what there is now and I will not say no.

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wanted it. For the top thing simply was: Mitchell was not fully convinced that he could face the townspeople again. This was not mere superciliousness on his part, however. True, he had been further away and for a longer spell than most of the people there--they had done no more than merely remain where they were born and stay as indigenous as their mules. So if this were the case you could pass it off as bare haughtiness on Mitchell's side and let it go at that. But (to get down to the real butt of it) there was more. For Mitchell had come to realize that while he himself had been away, he had also failed to make no more of himself and his life than he had originally took off with. Subsequently, he developed an apparition of doom and failure, and the fact that he feared that others, too, might come to see this was the reason he had kept himself in New York. Yet--even with all this--Mitchell could feel the night's morning coming. For as he again walked down the streets that had been his birth, he could see, just beyond him, that the sun's yellow shafts had finally pierced through and started to rim the earth with rays of pure light. And as he walked into them, Mitchell felt--perhaps more than anything else--what it was like to be keenly alive.

Then he came upon the Dreamland. At first it did not seem to him as big or as impressive as he had originally remembered it. But the more Mitchell looked at it, the more he came to feel that there was indeed something special about

the place. For although the Arabian mosque and Moorish columns of the Dreamland's entrance were really no more than an anteroom to the green, upholstered seats from Cincinnati on the inside, there was something about the theater's facade that was mystifying. Because (and what if no more than only the outside?) the very manner in which the Dreamland was built surely adumbrated the fact that even a place like Waycross was not without regality. For despite the fact that the theater was bordered by Leroy Simkins' Seed Co. and Hal's Drugs, it not only dominated the block but rose above it, so that when people entered it, it was as if they were no longer dirt farmers and factory men, but, instead, every substance of their dreams.

So as Mitchell went in the theater's lobby and began walking past the replicas of Greek statuary from the fifth century's Golden Age that lined it, he found himself thinking about this very much. It was then that he started to feel both humility and pride over the fact that he might be working for such a place, and, for the first time since getting off the train, Mitchell felt himself genuinely home.

In the booth, however, it was different. Of course Mitchell did not know Ham was going to be up there this early too, so when he walked in and saw the janitor fooling with the reel cans he said: "What th' hell are <u>you</u> doing up here, nigger?"

Ham was taken back and mad enough to say "I thought Iz'spose ter be th' one axin' 'stead uv tellin'" but he didn't since he could see Mitchell reaching down to get the crowbar that the other operator kept at the base of the projector. Instead, he just reached back--quicklike--and said: "I'm only th' janitor, Mister, and I hafta be heah early Monday's ter carry up th' noo pictures."

"God, why didn't you say so sooner," Mitchell told Ham, putting down the crowbar: "I thought you might be a break-in man or something."

The "I'm sorry" came later, after Mitchell told Ham he was new around the place and was there to try out for the job.

"Shit," Ham said, sitting back on the reel can: "There ain't <u>nuthin'</u> kinfusin' 'bout this. Ah've watched that uder operator whut usta work heah since I been ole 'nuff ter pee, so I spects I kin tel'ya jest 'bout anythin' you be blidge ter know; Take them black boxes ov' there"--while he said this Ham had reached inside his shirt and taken out a package of Brown Mule and pulled off a slug; then he offered one to Mitchell--"th' furst thing that uder operator do is go ov' there and push that lever up."

Mitchell did and as soon as he had a motor started up and began turning so he said "shit" too as well as: "This place ain't going to be hard to run a'tall. That ain't nothing but a goddamn generator and I learned enough about

them just from driving that lorry in France."

"That whut?"

"Lorry. That's one of those fucked-up trucks the British make; I drove one in France during the war."

"They anythin' lak a Ford?" Ham asked, since other than his mule and the Georgia & Florida railroad train, Fords were the only means of conveyance Ham was familiar with.

"Worse. You'd be driving along fine when-WHAM-the bastard starts flopping all over the road like a pregnant goose trying to shit and won't run worth a damn. Lights start going down and everything."

"Whutya doo?" Ham asked, obviously interested, but none too, since he had not missed a lick with the Brown Mule.

"Well, I'd get out the crowbar I carried under the seat"--Mitchell pointed to the one in the booth, but did not pick it up--"and stop that damn lorry cold. Then I would get out and open up the hood and knock the piss out of the generator until I shook the brushes loose. After that the lights would brighten right back up and the fucker would run fine!"

"You musta really give them French hell!" Ham exclaimed, obviously connecting the country Mitchell was in with the people he was fighting.

"I didn't give the French nothing," Mitchell retorted, mildly aggravated over Ham's ignorance. "We were only

helping them. Us and the English, that is. But we were all fighting the Germans."

"Oh."

"Well, it's not important now," Mitchell said, almost to himself, "it's done over anyway."

"This ain't," Ham said.

"You're certainly right there!" Mitchell replied, so he walked over and had a look at the projectors.

Without doubt, they were big machines. Black and over six feet tall, they seemed to have more knobs, gauges, and switches than even God required for any Creation. Yet they were so fierce and pagan looking, the fact that only one two-handed man was solely responsible for such mammoth manipulating seemed positively less than Christian. But Mitchell knew where their power came from, so, knowing this, he turned to Ham and nonchalantly said: "There anything you specially like to see?"

"Shore is!" Ham exclaimed, bringing his hands together and reeling back on the reel can: "Let's show that 'Popeye' I jes' bring up."

"'Popeye'?"

"Shore. Man, Popeye's better 'n Jesus any day!--Know why?"

Mitchell had no idea.

"'Cause Popeye don't take no shit off nobody," Ham

explained joyfully: "Evertime sumbody give Popeye sum trouble, he jes' haul off 'n whop 'um." Then Ham laughed and for the first time Mitchell looked at the Negro in a different light. Because the laugh had not been the regular relaxed guffaw he had heard all morning. Rather, it seemed hidden and pent-up; the kind of laugh Mitchell was sure Ham did not mean for everyone to hear.

But then--previously--Mitchell never would have took Ham to come out with such a statement either. Yet even though he knew full well it would shame his mother (she was a downright Methodist and right particular at it) Mitchell did not offer rebuttal. He did not because when he was in France with the war Mitchell had decided that people have their ways. And it really does little good to bother or interfere with them. This he had determined on the road to Marseilles. Because it was there that he happened to pass a nun, an old woman of perhaps sixty or seventy, who was holding a dead infant in her arms and pressing the child's small head into one of her empty breasts.

He did not stop. He could have and in fact was about to, but the woman did not so much as look up when the lorry passed. Seeing this, Mitchell pressed the lorry's accelerator on further to the floor because he thought too: <u>what is there to do anyway</u>.

That was when Mitchell stopped sending his mother the money to put in church for him every Sunday. Instead, he just saved it, and when the war was over went to Paris and spent it all. When he had, he took a freighter back to New York where he mets Spots Walker outside a racetrack and went with him to East Harlem to shoot pool.

Now, home in the booth, he was ready to show Ham the Popeye cartoon. But he had to thread-up first so, taking out the Simplex instruction booklet from his hip pocket that the manager had loaned him, Mitchell opened up the top magazine and put the reel of film in. Then he wound off what he figured would be enough film to thread-up with and turned to the section which showed you how.

It seemed relatively easy: all you had to do was follow the arrows, and surely anybody could do that. So Mitchell put the film around the first sprocket just like it said, felt for the teeth, and then, feeling them, snapped the holder shut. Next, he lined the film up in the gate and made sure that it was framed correctly so that the picture would not split the screen. Satisfied that it would not, he closed the gate and locked it in place. The rest was fairly simple. All he had to do was put the film through the sprockets which would take it down to the sound head and make sure that he had it tight enough around the drum so that the sound would not wrobble. This done, all that remained was to hit one more sprocket and then wind the remaining film on the take-up reel in the bottom magazine.

Now he was ready to begin. But as he stood beside the projectors Mitchell turned to Ham and said: "Why don't you go down to the balcony where you can see better; when it starts I'll come down and watch it with you myself."

Ham told Mitchell that he thought this fine enough an idea. Actually, Ham could plainly see that Mitchell wanted to be by himself when he started the show, so Ham left the booth and took a seat in the balcony just beneath the projectors' portholes. Here he would be able to see Popeye and hear Mitchell in the booth as well.

Listening, he did. For the projector's motor soon started, but Mitchell opened the douser too soon and the numbers before the picture came on the screen.

Still Ham thought <u>good you doin' al' rat: it's out there an' on th' sprockets an' runnin' fine</u>!"

So when all the numbers ran out Popeye was on the screen in all his mighty color. Ham couldn't have been more pleased were he doing it himself. All he needed now was some popcorn and maybe an egg sandwich, and, in fact, was beginning to wonder what was keeping Lucile--the girl who popped the popcorn behind the stage and in her own way loved him--when he noticed that Mitchell had slipped up on him and now sat in the seat beside him: "She's running <u>jam-up</u>, ain't she!" Mitchell said, hardly able to suppress his delight.

"Shore is," Ham told him: I ain't never seed Popeye look so good!"

Little else, however, was said. Because even though Ham and Mitchell sat beside each other and watched the cartoon together, it was as if the images that they saw on the screen were really no more than visual vehicles, capable of transporting each to realms of their own separate fears and fantasies, since--in the Dreamland's strange world of dark and vicarious light--both once more had grown silent.

Of course Ham did this quite regularly. His mornings usually started at the Dreamland, and he got to the empty theater before it was yet light. He had his own key and could let himself in through the door at the rear of the stage. The Dreamland was completely dark at such times and just as quiet, but Ham knew where a light was, so (reaching up and finding the cord in the darkness) he pulled it on with one quick motion of his hand.

Yet even with the light on, you could not call the Dreamland bright--one single bulb simply was not enough. But what was he to do? Afterall, had not Lucky repeatedly told him: "Right here, see?--all you have to do is just pull it down: so there ain't no need for you to be messing with my switchboard now, is it?"

Still, the fact of its size not withstanding, the light was enough for Ham to do what he must: for, with it,he found the coffee and filled the pot and while he was waiting for it to get ready he turned on the radio he had won playing bingo at the Two State Colored Fair and tuned in the Gospel

Four from a station just out of Jacksonville. Then, sitting down and settling himself back against the stage wall, Ham rolled a cigarette from the patch of rabbit tobacco that grew beside his mule pen and lit up in one easy draw.

The tart morning smoke and black coffee did him good. As breakfasts went, they were not--but they did wake him and form his mornings, and as he eased them down and listened to the Gospel Four on the radio Ham could think about the time when he had no radio at all. Besides, there was really no need for him to spend his morning thinking about food anyway, since Ham knew--sure as day--that Lucile would be in shortly, and when <u>that</u> girl came in she always had food enough for the both of them. So, this being the color of his horse, Ham was free (<u>after</u> his coffee and morning cigarette) to let his mind travel.

But before he could do so he had to turn the Gospel Four off.

Once more the Dreamland filled with a strange, resolute quietness. Now Ham was set. He began quickly: almost eagerly--although what he did was at its best no more than outwardly custodial.

Yet Ham knew that--without it--the Dreamland could not so much as open her doors. For to get down at it: it was Ham who made the Dreamland ready. Because he cleaned and polished her, and when her doors were opened and people began streaming in, Ham looked around and Ham <u>knew</u>.

So first he would clean the floor, but as he was cleaning it Ham let his mind loose. And though the Negro was doing no more than spreading through the aisles and searching with his flashlight for the scattered remains of candy, popcorn, and chewing gum that had been eaten during the previous performances, the stilled and blackened aphony which surrounded him permitted Ham to imagine himself a New Orleans trumpet player wagging down Bourbon Street. Or, even Jesus struggling to conquer Golgotha's crest. . . .

. . .above them in the booth a bell rang. Mitchell heard it too, but he had become so pulled in with the cartoon that he did not pay it serious mind.

About a minute later the last of the cartoon ran through the projector and the screen was suddenly white with light.

"What happened?" Mitchell explained, back, and rising to his feet: "Where's the rest of the show?"

"In th' cans," Ham calmly told him not getting up, but perhaps no longer thinking about Jesus or Bourbon Street either.

"Isn't it supposed to follow the cartoon?" Mitchell exclaimed again, still standing.

"It's 'spose too al' rat," Ham said, nodding: "only you hafta put it in th' uder machine furst."

"Do what?" Mitchell asked, sitting back beside the Negro perplexedly.

"You hear that bell?" Ham asked Mitchell slowly, not looking at him directly, but at the screenful of white light below.

Mitchell nodded, remembering.

"Well, whenerver you hears that," Ham explained, "that means git ready 'cause yoah film 'bout ter run out."

"Get ready for what?" Mitchell still asked.

"Yoah change-over--that's when you change from one machine ter th' next."

"Oh?"

"You 'member seein' those two dots cum up there?"--Ham pointed to the top right hand corner of the screen and Mitchell thought about it for a while and then allowed he did--"well, that yoah signal."

Mitchell did not say anything so Ham just continued explaining: "Now when you sees th' furst dot you starts yoah motor; then when th' next one cum you hits yoah light and sound."

After Ham explained it to Mitchell, it all seemed so simple. In fact, the more Mitchell thought about it, the harder it was for him to understand why he had not thought of it in the first place. So he got up--the top of his head almost hitting the bottom of the light from the projector--and went into the booth to shut off the light and try again. This time, however, Mitchell did not want Ham there so he simply did not ask the Negro to come with him. But before he even had had time to kill the light Lucile came out from behind the stage and yelled up toward the balcony "Hey, Ham, Ah thought you said you wanted sum breakfust befo' you show'd

me de noo pichur.!!" and Ham just thought OH SHIT . . . . But coming out the booth and back toward him again Mitchell merely said: "Who's that?"

"Nuthin' 'cept that blame popcorn girl," Ham told him, trying to sound aggravated, "runnin' off her mouf."

"Well you better go check anyway."

Hurrying down the steps to hush Lucile before she and her big mouth said anything more Ham thought I know he ain't deef: he's heared everythin' I been sayin' jes' fine. . . .

Back behind the stage, in the popcorn room, Ham saw Lucile. She was over at the hotplate beating up the eggs for their breakfast, so Ham knew he couldn't get too mad. Still he thought some rebuke was necessary, so he careened in and said: "Sumthin' ail yoah mind, Nigger, yellin' out at me lak that?"

She looked at him, not hurt. "Ah only meant ter let you know Ah wuz hsah: dat all."

Well, it's al' rat, I 'spose," Ham said, softening: "They got a noo man up there 's all"--her eyes tensed--"but he's actin' lak he ain't heared nuthin'. Leastways when you yell'd up there he made lak he paid it no 'tenshun."

"You reckin he will?" Lucile said, suddenly becoming fearful.

"I doubts it."

"Well Ah better fix him sum breakfust too then 'cause you never know whut white folks be studyin' 'bout in deir

uder head. Hey, you don't reckin' he done had breakfust?"

"We ain't been talkin' 'bout no breakfasts, woman," Ham said, remembering the lorry, "so you ken jes' put on sum eggs an' don't kencern yoah mind!"

Lucile bent over-knowing Ham could see her hips plain when she so did and wanting him to-and got out three more eggs from the sack of them she had just placed on the floor: "Ah 'magen he gonna eat as much as yoo," she said.

"Liab'e."

She turned to him and smiled, and when she did Ham knew that he was not going to think very much about Popeye up and whopping people. In fact, Ham did not really seem to be thinking very much about anything now. Because as he looked into her eyes (they were warm and fecund, as liquid as any morning) they seemed to constellate everything in the room: as if nothing were as important--or more real--than their yearning. But then Ham thought about Mitchell and had to leave them and go out on the stage and call.

There, Mitchell had the light off the screen, but Ham could still see his head through the portholes in the booth so he took in all the breath he could and called out "Hey, Mister, you got time fer sum breakfast? Lucile's done already cooked it!"

Mitchell's head came out of the porthole and gave a "yes."

"We bring it up if you lak?"

"No bother," Mitchell said, his head still stuck out the porthole: "I'll meet you down there"--but before he came down Lucile had turned around so that her hips would not be where he could see them and winked at Ham after she had done so.

Even Ham understood--letting him watch was one thing: having someone else, another--so when Mitchell came in the room Ham got up from the table and gestured for him to take the seat where he had been sitting in order that he could stand and eat his eggs beside Lucile.

"Listen," Mitchell said, taking Ham's seat at the table, "I can stand good as sit--an egg's an egg, ain't it?"

"You talks lak a <u>preacher</u>," Lucile laughed, suddenly showing an interest in Mitchell but still keeping her hips turned from him.

"That's the <u>one</u> thing," Mitchell grinned waiting on his eggs, "I can safely say I am <u>not</u>!"

"My brother <u>wuz</u>," Lucile said, her voice becoming defensive despite the fact that she was trying not to let it, "an' Ah can't see whar hit done him no 'ticklur harm. <u>Myself</u>: Ah jes' believes in believin'."

The morning spilled out slowly. Ham and Lucile ate their breakfast beside the hotplate while Mitchell finished his at the table. Then he put his fork across the middle of his plate and killed the rest of his coffee: "You folks

care to see the rest of that picture" was the next thing that he said.

In the balcony the Dreamland was still dark. But not as much as before. For its booth now had an occupant and the light which came from the bulb in its ceiling burst through its portholes as unmitigatingly as the eye of a lighthouse.

True, it did not hit Ham or touch Lucile. But this was not because the Negro or his seatmate avoided it. Rather, it simply passed over them and fell, instead, on the row of seats just below. Yet Ham knew what was going on quite well. The fact that he was unable to see it, witness it, was of little matter because as Ham watched the cartoon hit the screen for the second time he knew that the picture would follow and be run without so much as a single flaw.

IN ALL THE LONELY PARTS OF THE WORLD

"Once," Aunt Caroline Brown said, "I had to go to Florida. I was not young then, so I could not walk. Or wait along side the road and skirt my legs till somebody came by on they mule or whatsomever it was they had and took me, so I had to go clean up to Modoc and catch the train myself."

Sister had just brought the eggs (Aunt Caroline could not keep a chicken: the cat invariably ate it) and was still twisting at the ring on her finger, but looking at her grandmother intensely, even though it hurt her to see how old Aunt Caroline had become. Yet, her grandmother was still wearing what looked like, and almost surely was, a red and white table-top colored dress and smoking on a pipe so full of rabbit tobacco that it looked as if Aunt Caroline's first-off plan had been to be a man or, worse, a just turned out person from the crazy house.

She lived alone too: atop Watch's Canyon in a sort of one-way cabin lean-to because the gorge just below was a good place to trap driftwood whenever enough of a rain came up to wash it down. Then (usually without fail) the sun would stay and stay and bake it dry. And this--since Aunt Caroline had gone bad in the back and could not chop--gave her all the firewood she needed for winter. What's more: not only did

she save buying cord wood, she could always find some white lady willing to pay her a dollar for any piece of it she did not care to burn so she could take it home and go stick it on her tea table.

But Sister said: "I'm not going to Florida, I'm just going to get married."

"That's what I know," her grandmother told her: "That's why I want you to set yourself down and hear out what I got to say."

With this, Aunt Caroline went and pushed back the boarded window and told Sister to take herself to one of the room's two rockers, as what she meant to tell her would likely fix her time. Or (since this was her real hope) at least set it back for a due.

Then, turning from the window and coming back to her own rocker, Aunt Caroline began:

"Now I imagine that you, a young girl of no more than fifteen, wearing that ring as fine as you are, thinks that's about all there is to it. Or, anyway most of it. But let me tell you something, girl: God Himself never gave Mary no ring. Neither did He see fit to either. So don't you just sit there grinin' your'un toward the sun like you heading straight for Heaven. Due to the fact that God did something better than that for Mary: He tole her just what He had in store for her."

After she had said this Aunt Caroline seemed to be

breathing better. But since she was a fat person, you could not uncount the rocking. For as Aunt Caroline rocked back, the weight of her large chest and heavy bosoms pressed into her, and this may have aided her expellation. Contrary-wise, as Aunt Caroline reeled forward, her chest and bosoms fell from her,and this--undoubtedly--pulled her lungs open and made them all the more ready for air.

At any rate, though, Aunt Caroline was still saying to Sister: "But just <u>what</u> has Sutch tole you? <u>Nothing</u> I bet. All <u>you</u> know is that he works in a mill and has brought hisself a new Oldsmobile on time. <u>My</u>!"

Sister looked back at the floor. Aunt Caroline's cat had just come in but scarcely looked at her. Instead, it headed for Aunt Caroline and jumped in her lap because she knew that the old woman would have a piece of rabbit leg for her to gnaw on from the rabbit she caught in the box just outside her cabin, probably yesterday. Suddenly, though, Sister, too, began to rock. She did this as slow and rhythmically as the old woman across from her--as if the congruence between them should be more than the mere blood that flowed in their veins--yet when she spoke her words were different: "I'm keepin' <u>my</u> husband," Sister said vehemently, then perhaps wishing she hadn't: but still continuing--"Your'uns always run <u>off</u>."

"Haw!" Aunt Caroline said, spitting out a piece of rabbit tobacco that had pulled through her pipe and lulled

between her set teeth: "So do dogs."

"Ok," Sister said, resigning herself, "we was in Florida."

"Not yet," Aunt Caroline corrected her granddaughter, "we was in Modoc, waiting on the baggage car."

"Why the baggage car?" Sister asked. "I thought that people--"

"Because," Aunt Caroline sighed, "I had no luggage, and I knowed that's how I'd have to ride to get me there, seeing I had no ticket to take me."

"So the baggage-man," Sister began, only to have her grandmother stop her: "The baggage-man nothing," Aunt Caroline simply abrupted, as if being adumbrative was something she did not care for and so did not give moment, "I merely knew what he wanted. So I tole him I had a high-toned daughter that worked in the finest fancy-house in Jacksonville that I was aimin' to see pretty bad. Then all I had to tell the baggage-man next was--if he let me ride in there with him--the first time he had a stop-over in Florida,I'd fix it up so he could come see her."

"Did you?"

"Of course not, girl!" Aunt Caroline retorted, looking for the first time as if she might be put-off with her granddaughter, though Sister could not be sure whether her grandmother's ire was caused over the fact that she actually believed that Sister thought she had a daughter in a place like

that or, more likely, that she was simply reeked that her granddaughter would think she would take herself to Florida for no other reason than that of giving railroadmen particulars as to where they might go to find their bind and leisure. But, even with the look Aunt Caroline was giving Sister, she was not disposed enough to stop her rocking or put the cat down so she could come over to where Sister was and give her her due. Instead, Aunt Caroline just pulled back full and strong on her rabbit tobacco and said: "But men will believe near anything you tell them about a woman--especially if you tell them they can have her for themselves and go someplace and find out; but besides," Sister's grandmother continued, "I was thinking about a fancy-house anyway. Since that's where I knowed I'd have to go to find out what it was I was at."

"Which was?"

"Which was a lie and a deceit." With this, Aunt Caroline looked at Sister so hard that her granddaughter could hardly stand it. "That's what I tole the white child I raised--fed on my own milk too--because one day, same as you, she come in grinnin' like a jumpin' monkey and saying I-am-going-to-get-married all over her face."

"She was going to be married in Florida?" Sister's voice said. It was still flat, but Aunt Caroline could tell she was becoming interested.

"No," her grandmother told her, "but that's where the man she was going to marry took his first wife--"

"To the whorehouse--"

It was the first time Aunt Caroline had heard her granddaughter use the word, though she was sure, even before she had heard her say it, that Sister knew what it meant. So to show she was not one incapable of taking stride, Aunt Caroline shot back: "Whorehouse?, no! Since a man that is just getting hisself married--especially if he is marrying a looker like that first wife of his was--is not going to dally his face into the first bedhead of a woman what mingles his way. Or at least not until his bride has become his wife and then popped him out a child or two. . .So that's why I went to Florida. To see. Because seven months after the man that was going to marry Sue-Aileen married his first wife, he was right back here (when she said this, Aunt Caroline picked up her foot and slammed the brogan that was on it so heavily on the dirt floor that dust came up: but Sister knew quite well that her grandmother meant Modoc and saw no need to make joke on it) without her claimed he had divorced her in Jacksonville, and I've already done tole you what a looker she was--and now back. And telling Sue-Aileen that it was she he had been after all along anyway."

Of course by this time Aunt Caroline's pipe had gone out. But she was so busy looking at Sister, it was doubtful that she had noticed it. Leastways, she did not take the time to light it again. Instead, she just went on with what she

was telling Sister, scarcely (now) allowing time to draw in breath to do it with either, as if--long ago--she had been thought out what she wanted to tell her granddaughter so that once her granddaughter had made her way up the Canyon and got to see her, she would hardly need, or require, air: "You see," Aunt Caroline explained, "I had come to figure that a man that would leave a looker woman after only seven months of her must either be on the wack in his lower regions. Or else whammed up so high in them that he had no less to do with a brand new wife in seven months than wear her slap out. One. So I just took it upon myself to go to Jacksonville, Florida, and find out which."

This was when Sister did not say "why?" like her grandmother hoped she would, so Aunt Caroline had to go and fill in for her: "In order that as soon as I found out whichever, I could rustle back to Modoc and tell Sue-Aileen more than that fool and his string tie parked up on her front porch was."

With this, though, Sister could say: "I won't have to ask you how you found out?"

"No!" her grandmother replied. "For I am going to tell you: I went to church. And when I heard all that screamin' and hollerin' about Forseyth Street, I knewed I wouldn't have to stay and hear the part about the Fire and Hell. So I left."

Now Sister was sure she had it. So she said, "and headed straight for Forseyth Street. Then she stopped rocking so that

by this her grandmother came to figure that now Sister was more ready to listen to her than when she had first come in the door and only brought the eggs. But then Aunt Caroline caught Sister's eye catching her ring, and when she did, Aunt Caroline knew that her granddaughter was thinking more about Nazz Sutch and his new Oldsmobile than she was of Forseyth Street and Jacksonville, Florida, so she thought to herself for a while and then, remembering how it was, began:

"Wrong! I went to find me some slow gin or Memphis spoon first--anything that I could turn up on Sunday, which was, as I thought it might be, light corn. So that when I walked up to see the woman that run the place and ask her whether she would need someone extra to help make and turn the beds, she could tell right off that I was not the kind of lady that did not know dogs ain't the only things that pees on lumber or feels inclined to dig holes in the ground."

"You are telling me that she hired you," Sister said. But as she said it Sister seemed to demure and (or so Aunt Caroline thought) turn somewhat fearful, since her voice now sounded dim and even childlike.

"None!" her grandmother still replied. "All I am saying is merely that it was Sunday. And since that is the best time of week to clean one of them places up, the woman standing at the door simply got out it soonest she seed me heading for the broom. But--have it your way--neither her nor I knew nothing yet."

"She weren't a whore?" Sister said. This time her voice was not incongruent, but back and full and showing all the up-age that Aunt Caroline so liked about her granddaughter.

"That, and the woman at the door was old; though there are still--" But with this Sister's grandmother just stopped. Because as Aunt Caroline was right at what she was getting set to say, she had noticed her granddaughter's eyes widening beyond what she thought a girl of even Sister's fifteen summers could call as claim. Yet trying not to be one to show her turn, Sister's grandmother drew in more breath than she would probably need for most the bible and promptly said: "But that was my fault too; since at that time even I was thinking that when you take it upon yourself to check on a man, your first-off job is to go and see his whore. . .Only then I did not know I would have to see Ott too; then I merely thought that Cal was going to be enough. . ."

"Cal was the woman at the door?"

"Cal was the New Orleans yellow asleep upstairs. The woman at the door merely opened it and stood out my way whilst I went to see 'bout the broom. Yet even then I thought I would have to sweep out every whore-room in Jacksonville before I found her. But when I opened that door and saw her--naked as Eve and I imagine as proud too--I knew that soon as I had swept out her room, I merely had to sit down and take leisure because once Cal woke up that would be enough."

"Since?"

"Since," Aunt Caroline relented, "Cal was a looker. The best looker-whore in there, and I knewed from the way that that man what was parking hisself up on Sue-Aileen's porch was looking at her, I knewed from the way that first wife of his looked too, that he was not one to waste his time on trash."

Even as she said this the air in the gully had begun to rise and smell like rain. Let it, Aunt Caroline thought. The cat had yet to clean its piece of rabbit leg and that which it had been pulled off of was done cooked and already salted down to keep, so Sister could stay for supper if should came to must. Besides, one night away from Nazz Sutch and that new Oldsmobile--especially since he could not drive it up the canyon and come get her--might even allow Sister's mind study and at no more repine than what her grandmother (this was before she had breathed her final due of both them and Uncle Cot too and--so--just left Monck's Corner and Dorchester County altogether and took her stay to the canyon) had heard streetmen and roll tent biblicals no more past their bibles than Adam demean as the body's own trappings due to the sure and laconic fleshhood of woman. Then, just as Aunt Caroline thought she caught Sister's ear turned to what was sounding like approaching thunder, the old woman knew she would have to draw in and breathe out her breath as quick as possible in order to say: "That's how she slept. Naked. The sheets back; the windows all flung open,

like her whole body needed sky and air and wind to blow across it and the sea's wild crashing sound just beyond too, so why was I not to think that's so's she can sleep better and maybe be at peace too?" Her breath still not out: "Which was why I felt sorry for Cal at first."

"And not later?"

"No," her grandmother said sadly.

"Why?" Sister asked, her head turned from the nowfalling rain.

"Because in that room, when I first saw Cal sleeping, I had not yet done what is dangerous."

"Which was--is?"

"Coming to know somebody and then letting it rest."

Her granddaughter did not reply. Instead, she just looked at her grandmother as if she thought Aunt Caroline was getting ready to talk about Sutch and told herself that--were it to come--she would simply bend her mind from it and merely look like she was listening.

"Because," Aunt Caroline was forced to continue, "when I first saw her sleep and her nakedness, I thought she needed ocean and air and sky; the open window and the wind too. Later though, when I had been in Cal's room longer than I thought my leisure required, I saw that Cal's whoredom was mainly due to laziness. Since who but a whore can sleep till five in the afternoon and pay no mind at clothes?"

But being that she was still windful and ready and seemingly sure of where she was headed, Aunt Caroline had neither time nor inclination to let Sister speak: "And not laziness out of not being able to do no better or more or something different either. But laziness pure and cold, since I had seen Cal make change myself. But speck her to be at Woolworth's at nine, no!"

"So?" Sister finally got to say.

"So after, or once, I knowed this," her grandmother told her, "I knowed something else too: that I hated her. Not what she did, mind you; since there are more than a plenty women who go by this, though I will grant you that you seldom get them to call it by its first name. But when it comes to laziness. . ."

"Your time is took," Sister filled in, proud.

"Bless your goose, child," Aunt Caroline had to ring, but let me on, now. For, you see, I was doing no less with Cal than she was first doing with me too. Because when Cal first woke up she saw me sitting there and looking at her like I was more down on women than Paul ever got to be after he went and journeyed hisself to Damascas and got stone--"

"--light crazy?"

"Ok, but lets don't bible, hear," her grandmother said, stopping her. "Lets just stick with Jacksonville, which--as God probably knows--will be enough."

Hearing this, Sister's eyes widened and then darkened suddenly and turned hard when she heard her grandmother begin to say "Since I was black. . ."

And stayed this way even though Aunt Caroline had once more begun to rock. So she knew (for now her granddaughter's eyes seemed even narrower than her cat's) she would have to tell Sister what all this time she had hoped she would not even have to say, much less lead up to: "No, it's not <u>that</u>; it was not my <u>color</u> at all. It was only <u>where</u> my color was, not <u>what</u> it was that was botherin' Cal."

Sister still frowned, but Aunt Caroline could see her granddaughter's eyes were more clearful now, and while she took this for a hopeful sign, she still well knew there was not yet time to relight her pipe: "Because <u>all</u> Cal said was 'What I do not simply understand is what is a blue-gum, Sea-Island nigger like you <u>doing</u> down here. I mean: why aren't you in New York or Chicago or someplace up North like that? I even hear Detroit ain't bad. Since <u>up</u> there most of the men'--this was back then, not now--'have never hardly <u>seed</u> a nigger before, and when they do you may shorely bet that they want to see a black one--not Mississippi quarters like people hanker at down here."

"She told you this when she first woke up?"

Her grandmother nodded: "But that was only because Cal thought I had come to Jacksonville to whore. Of course I was soon to set her different, but then <u>she</u> did something

else for me too. . ."

"This was when--"

"Cal looked dead at me and said: 'Get up and come over to this window, Blue-Gum, and look out, and when you see somebody coming down the street or sidewalk that ain't selling themselves to somebody or something, you let me know so I can come see them too; in the meantime I'm getting myself dressed.'"

"After that," Sister's grandmother said, smiling, "I liked Cal fine."

"And were over your danger too?"

Aunt Caroline had not expected it this soon. So her smile stayed as she looked into her granddaughter's eyes, which were now no longer hard or lapidescence but, instead, soft and nacreous, almost like inner stars.

"Yes. Because I had seen, or come to know in that room with Cal, the danger of the all and the false of the only."

Saying this, Aunt Caroline turned from her granddaughter and looked out the still open window at the falling rain. Momentarily she thought of closing it. But then she realized this would only cut off the rain's sound and even the soft, wet smell it brought with it, so she quickly put this out her mind and turned back to Sister: "Since when I first walked in that room I was only seeing Cal's sleep and Cal's nakedness; it was not to after I sat down and had took leisure and brought my eyes to that clock--and it could not have been this: it could have been the sun or the shadows

longing on the floor--that I knowed more."

"Which was her laziness."

"Yes, since at first I thought only sky and air and ocean were going over nakedness and sleep; later, though," Aunt Caroline continued, looking at Sister as slow and soft as a new leaf turning from budlike shoot to green, "when I knewed laziness was there and as much of true as any, I could do no better than hate."

"This, danger?"

At first Aunt Caroline did not let on either yes or no.

Which caused Sister to think she had said or done wrong and that her grandmother was not even going to reply, much less answer. Then (with her voice no quieter than the rain falling beyond,and sometimes into, the cabin's lone and open window) Aunt Caroline said: "Dangerous because maybe then I would have stopped and not walked to that window: since knowing, loving, requires maybe not always overlooking but sometimes pushing too. Due to the fact that once I got back from that window--"

"--Cal was still lazy."

Aunt Caroline's smile returned, fuller, more complete than before.

"And Sutch?"

"And wait. We haven't got to Ott yet," Sister's grandmother told her. "Or even supper. . ."